Response to 80 Langton St. Panel "Does the Avant-Garde Film Still Exist?"

by Warren Sonbert

My turn? I may ask a few rhetorical questions, but you needn't answer me immediately.

Terms: I dislike the term "Avant-Garde" in dealing with these works. It sounds as if some naughty children were up to no good. "Experimental" isn't much better since a finished product is in no sense an experiment. The "Personal Film" comes across as too diaristic, sentimental and precious. Though vague and covering a host of meanings, I prefer "Independent" Film, if any kind of tag-label is considered essential in talking about these works.

Intro: Rather than direct my energies to the puerile question: "Avant-Garde Film - Does it Still Exist?" one might just as well ask the questions "Does the Narrative Film Exist?", or "Does the Political Film Exist?", or "Does Film Criticism Exist?", and most vital of all pressing questions,"Do these hallowed halls of 80 Langton St. Exist?".

Narrative: In the same sense as people view literature as stories and paintings as moralistic anecdotes, Film is generally regarded as the art of the narrative. Now in the comparatively short history of film, there have been only two filmmakers of genius to have worked in narrative frameworks: Hitchcock as exemplar of montage and Sirk of mise-en-scene. Narrative filmmaking hit its stride in the'20's, had a golden period in the'30's and'40's, and an autumnal renaissance in the'50's with a vital reinvestigation of mise-en-scene due to the rigors and confines of Cinemascope, as an alternative to the recessive pictorial guidelines dictated by the TV screen. Once all films were designed to eventually wind-up in the home on the small tube, Commercial Narrative Cinema pretty much became totally worthless and has remained so for the last 25 years. Narrative is stiflingly boring, uninventive and predictable. In the 30 minutes or so that it takes for a narrative film to make a point, or produce some frisson, the same could be done in an Independent Film in three seconds or two shots. For those locked into the 19th century novella sensibility, who believe film to be cinematic theater, their silhouette romances' aesthetics are well-served by the narrative. Such penny dreadful materialism can hardly hope to cope with the poetry inherent in the Independent Film. No one demands that a soundtrack of background music accompany the reading of a poem, or that in order to be able to look at a painting it is absolutely essential to be plugged into some kind of aural explanation. So when film is taken seriously, when audience appreciation approaches maturity, so too will film no longer be chained to the confines of shallow character identifications and the simplicities of the soundtrack to goose matters along.

Politics: Now it is quite possible to hide behind being a Gayist, a Feminist or a Marxist and still be a lousy artist. Art is tied to Politics in absolutely no way whatsoever, or rather Art can be used by Politics, but Politics cannot be used by Art. There is no difference in the tools of hagiography of Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" and Vertov's "Three Songs for Lenin". In both demigogues and tyrants are celebrated with Eisenstein's knee-jerking technique of dialectical montage - a curse of the cinema if there ever was one. Show a good guy and cut to any honorific image, or replace the villain

of the moment with a perjorative image and there you have the editing technique of the unfortunately vast majority of montage films. Such easy marks will not survive close readings. To point the finger or celebrate without qualification is proporganda, not even "Politics", certainly not Art. To try to convert to your point of view, to call into questions the so-called political consciousness of others, is a self-aggrandizing limited imposition. Stendhal: "Any moral intention, that is to say any self-interested intention of the artist's, kills the work of art". What do Elliott Carter's Third St. Quartet or Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie have to do with Politics? Art is politics only in the sense of expanding horizons, broadening sensibilities, being presented with multiple points of view and the breakdown of rigidity. Art is presenting a given and then qualifying that statement, and then following that qualification with yet another objectivity. Art is destructive, yes, criminal acts to disrupt unquestioned codes, agreed, but not an act of Enlistment. Politics is the last refuge of a non-artist. Godard, a not very interesting filmmaker when he started out, another one of those second generation graverobbers, at least escaped the empty, facile proporganda of "Weekend", that Tati cum Keaton ripoff, in his early work. In his second feature, "Le Petit Soldat", he at least (and now we are speaking on the lowest narrative level) had the modicum of intelligence to blame both sides, the terrorists and the establishment, for deploying means of torture. He didn't take sides and say "we're the good guys and you're the bad guys" the way he later did. Anything that smacks of such easy solutions is beyond the pale of being excepted as Art. Stravinsky's "Les Noces" and not Shostakovich's "Leningrad Symphony" is the truly revolutionary work, the former as Text celebrates 19th century Russia, while the latter extols the new Soviet machinery. Similarly, Rivette's "Celine and Julie Go Boating" has in its three hours about a thimbleful of cinema compared to the reel of Brakhage's "Sincerity II".

Rivette & Brakhage: And in what possible sense can Rivette be considered Avant-Garde? His totally narrative films have an international distribution network, a cast and crew of scores of people, and a budget per project that could support the entire filmmaking population of Ludlow St. and their projects for the rest of their lives. Now one must acknowledge an immeasurable debt to Brakhage (a filmmaker from Colorado) for his freeing the confines of the Independent Cinema in the same way Sirk in the Narrative Film opened up the frameworks of mise-en-scene. Brakhage simply used every means of imagic language available as strokes of viable expression: out of focus, fuzzy, underexposed, overexposed, shaky, muddy, turgid, fast wipes, single frames, flare-outs (none of this tis true to be gotten from the High Art Europeans) were now part of the formal syntax of film and could not be rejected. But since Film is Montage, the intriguing ambiguity and flexibility of the moving image, and since Brakhage has disclaimed any embracing of editing as Significant Juxtapositions, his influence has been minimal as regards all the post-Brakhage generation of montage filmmakers. He has said that when he tried to "make a point" by putting one image next to another, it simply didn't work out, felt too constricted and "arty". So he dropped that attitude and more or less edited from a position of intuition, what "felt" right. Now I don't think it can be disputed that the overwhelming majority of montage filmmakers of recent years edit their works to some kind of formalist operative design or that "chance" and "vague, heartfelt combinations and flows" have made much of a dent. Therefore on an

imagic level much is owed to Mr. B. - but hardly anthing on an editing strategy framework. Indeed there is nowadays a return embrace to the clear, crisp, clean, in-focus, "correct" exposure schoòl of Independent Filmmaking. Besides I doubt if Mr. B. would approve of hordes of little clone Brakhages out there imitating his sensibilities.

Elitism & Critics: Now I am a filmmaker, fortunately not a critic. Otherwise I would have to keep up with the corrupt state of the art and subject myself to every debilitating film experience that came down the pike. Which by the way is the best revenge one can take on critics - they have to continually deal with all this dreck. When I lapse and allow myself some exposure I find 99.9% of what I see a lesson, or rather a warning, of what not to do. If your works are not shown in the right status-secure places, if no one likes them, it's probably because they're not very good - though here in California it's frowned upon to say such things. And charges of sexism or partisanship are as hollow as the instant gratification whines of spoiled children. If you can cut the mustard, then even if Steve Anker of the Cinematheque won't show your work, perhaps Edith Kramer of the PFA will, or if Karen Cooper of the NY Film Forum thumbs you down, perhaps John Hanhardt of the Whitney will lend a hand. If everyone turns a shoulder then try crocheting or finger-painting. No one is out there to give you the world. Work is necessary, and a good body of good work. This is not to discourage anti-salon showcases if the archives and museums and cinematheques of this world will not have you. So set up your screening areas in lofts, or storefronts, or tents, and if you and your work are worth the trouble they'll survive (eventually). The contemporary film scene needs such resistance, fresh air and alternative attacks. Goodness knows if I were satisfied with film today I wouldn't be making my own. So these charges of some kind of NY establishment critical mafia conspiracy that's preventing vital work from being shown is so much sour grapes, greed and baby tantrums. But people want the recognition without doing the work. People want to be reviewers on the Village Voice or curate film shows at the Whitney and that is among the emptiest forms of ambition.

I don't know why as a filmmaker I should be attacking or defending critics: for as we all know critics are worthless (though, by the way, both that curator/critic from The Kitchen and that programmer/critic of the NY Film Festival also happen to make films - which is more than can be said for some people in this room). And any artist who gives a fuck what a critic thinks is no artist. Besides throughout history its what the artist says about the form that's remembered - not the critics' opinions. If critics can't push their own discoveries and pets then they attack those of other critics. They have nothing to offer except selfish formulas and theories that have nothing to do with illuminating the works.

Now that the spectre of public opinion has reared its ugly head, if one wanted to refute those charges of so-called elitism then indeed I would hire a Mr. Harris or Mr. Gallup and cull the golden standard mean audience from the arenas of Peoria or Paducah and go for their collective opinions. But any artists running for a popularity contest is immediately disqualified as a creator - you just don't give people what they want - you take that away and provide some disquiet. I make my films for everyone, not just connoiseurs and aficianados. But if I wanted the so-called caveperson's opinion I certainly would know where to go. Like poetry, Independent Film doesn't fit into an immediately accessible slot. If it were instantly and readily understandable and analyzable and entertaining at all times and at all costs, then it couldn't shake up the viewer,

break the codes, and criminally assault the senses and intellect which are among the purposes of Art. And anything which is fully instantly analyzable needn't really be experienced. You can just get a paragraph report and that's that. And surely if something were not instantly analyzable the critic would be out of a job. Since critics are invariably a backward lot, the obvious texts of a Godard or a Rivette makes these scribes foam at the mouth in explanatory joy, whereas when confronted with the complexities of a Brakhage or a Markopoulos, they can't cope and all sorts of mindless babblings have been known to issue from their orifaces.

If Mallarme said a poem consists not of thoughts but of words, and Cezanne defines painting as nothing but colors, then film is moving images, nothing else. Cezanne again screams: "Works! Give us works! No more theories, theories corrupt men". Socrates in Plato's Apology says that any man in the street can tell you more about poetry than the poet can. Goethe on"Faust": "How can I tell you what I meant by it? My head was in a buzz!"

80 Langton St.: Why are we here? To promote personal greed, envy and jealousy. Is that why at least $2000* has been spent on this evening? To invite, fly in and accommodate filmmakers from three cities, videotape this historic document of world-shaking concerns, based on the pettiness of a few people's selfish ego-aggrandizement? We at the Cinematheque wish we could be so generous and cavalier. But on a budget of 1/25 of what 80 Langton St. has, with its endowment of a ¼ of a million*, we cannot afford to do so. Of course we do have 120 film shows a year. How many film shows have been put on here at 80 Langton St. this past year? How many local filmmakers shown and supported? Does anybody dare mention how many? Fly Marjie Keller in for $500, not to show her work, no, but to attack her. 80 Langton St. spends $2000* on a publicity party for a new book that attacks the fragile situations of the Independent Film artist (and goodness knows there are alot of things out there more worth attacking, in which the stakes are higher and frameworks more corrupt). These are the real scandals of the evening.

Finale: Being an Independent Filmmaker is basically a thankless, unrewarding (certainly in the lucrative sense) occupation. Even the so-called elite establishment has endless trouble making ends meet, scraping up enough moolah for the next project, much less for anything approaching bourgeois living standards. You have to be obsessed, you have to need to do this beyond any other consideration. It has to satisfy your own problems and questions. It is a trying task, yet when it works for you, when the problems are solved and mastered to your own satisfaction, then indeed it's the greatest pleasure on earth. But it can only be a question of self - not of impressing others or claiming a stake in the fluctuating fickle critical and limited exhibitory frameworks. Why anyone would want to be an Independent Filmmaker is beyond me. Even the status of critical acclaim and easy exposure is empty and quickly evaporates. It has to be the only thing you can help doing. Though always in a fragile situation, the Independent Film is here, it will go on, continue and flourish. It is the only avenue for those who want to take risks and satisfy their own self-imposed demands.

*These figues disputed by 80 Langton St.